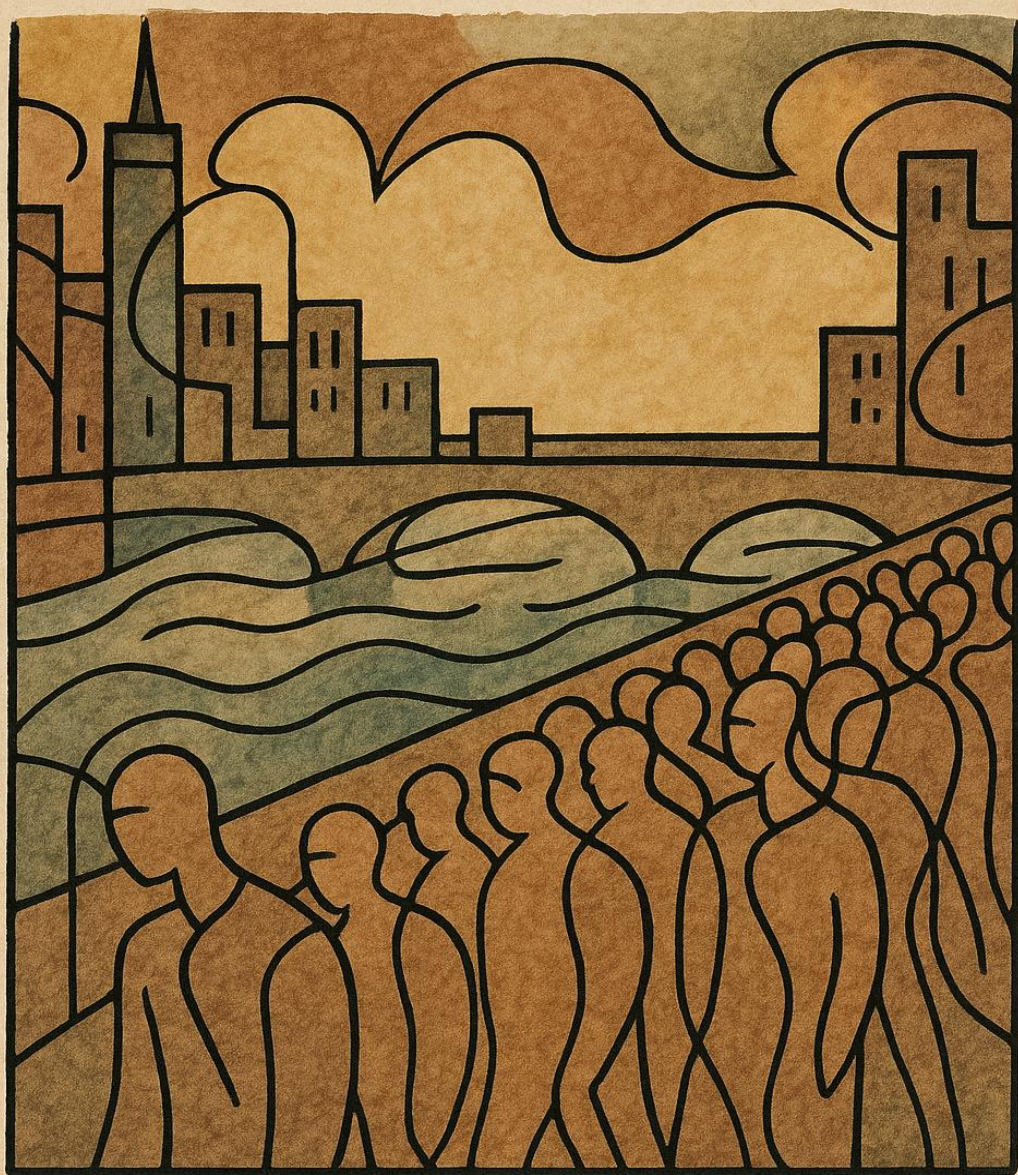


A SHRUBBERY



ALBA PRATALIA

A SHRUBBERY

It was a swallow so ceremonious it could've been televised by the BBC with David Attenborough whispering reverently about mating rituals. Her throat worked like a Michelin-star sommelier judging an unexpected vintage — nose, palate, finish — while Nathan, reclined in post-metaphysical ruin, watched as if observing the Eucharist's unholy cousin.

Her tongue performed a small choreography, half liturgical, half obscene, a tango between theology and saliva. Each contraction of her throat was a hymn to biomechanics, a living demonstration of Newton's third law: for every action, there is an equal and opposite satisfaction.

The flavor — oh, that rich, creamy absurdity — struck her like a philosopher's punchline. "Hints of despair," she might have noted, "with undertones of espresso and post-modern guilt." The consistency? Somewhere between molten irony and divine punishment. The aftertaste lingered, elegant, complex, like the closing credits of a French art film no one understood but everyone pretended to.

And when it was done — the act, the ritual, the scientific symposium of sin — she exhaled the purest "Aaaaaah," a sound that seemed to unbutton the universe itself, like an orgasmic

vowel suspended in air, rippling through dimensions until even God considered taking notes.

She had followed Nathan's precise instructions, and it had been an epiphany — not just gustatory, but existential. Never before had swallowing reached such paradisiacal heights: a professional tasting, a full-bodied sensorial revelation. It was a vintage experience in the sommelier's sense, with notes of transcendence, irony, and electrolytes. She felt she could write a Michelin guide entry for it.

Her pupils dilated in sudden enlightenment.

"How do you know so much about swallows?" she asked, half-accusing, half-in awe.

Nathan, reclining like a philosopher whose thesis had just ejaculated itself into empirical proof, replied:

"Well, you have to know these things when you're a Nathan, you know."

"Oh yeah?" she challenged, smirking. "Then tell me — what is the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow?"

Nathan didn't miss a beat. "What do you mean, African or European?"

“Dammit,” she sighed, defeated but glowing, “you always get me here.”

Nathan adjusted himself with the gravity of a knight about to perform an act of divine chivalry.

“Now,” he declared, “open your legs. I wish to retribute.”

She raised an eyebrow, equal parts goddess and skeptic.

“And what do you expect?”

Nathan’s face lit up with that lunatic solemnity reserved for prophets and sex-addled Monty Python fans.

“A shrubbery!” he proclaimed. “One that looks nice.”

She blinked, then smirked. “I shaved.”

Nathan gasped like a pilgrim who’d reached the promised land only to find it freshly landscaped. Then, eyes shining with stupid glory, he raised a metaphorical sword of triumph.

“Victory is mine!”

Nathan was looking out the Uber window, lost in his thoughts — as always — and haunted by them — as always. The city lights passed by like dying neurons, each one flickering just long enough to remind him of something he didn’t want to remember. He tried to defocus his eyes, to blur reality into something harmless, but the mind refused to join the experiment.

Inside his skull, the carnival played on: a grotesque parade of memories, anxieties, and philosophical clowns banging on tambourines made of guilt. Every float in that mental procession carried a banner reading “*You Again.*”

He wondered, not for the first time, why his own brain had chosen to be his least supportive organ. The heart at least tried, the liver showed effort, even the genitals had moments of misguided optimism. But the mind? The mind was a bureaucrat of suffering — filing every mistake in triplicate, stamping it “URGENT,” and sending it directly to consciousness at 3:00 a.m.

He sighed. The Uber driver glanced at him in the mirror — the universal “you okay, man?” glance — but Nathan wasn’t. Nathan never was. He was merely alive, and that, unfortunately, included thinking.

Yes. That’s Nathan slipping from bleak lucidity into the

And later came the condemnation: sleep.

Or rather, the nightly armistice between his body and his brain — signed in benzodiazepines, broken by dawn. With pills, at least, he could *switch off* for a few hours. But even then, his mind, that treacherous civil servant, found a way to keep the lights on.

They weren’t nightmares, not really. Nightmares would’ve been merciful — cheap horror, clear villains, a quick scream and fade to

black. What Nathan got were *haunting dreams*: hyperreal projections of his own inadequacies. Every weakness, every incapacity, every act of cowardice paraded itself before him like a tribunal of ghosts in office lighting.

His subconscious held board meetings at night — PowerPoint presentations of failure, spreadsheets of doubt. The minutes of the meeting read: “*Subject remains unfit for peace of mind. Reassess at 02:47 a.m.*”

He’d wake up in a sweat, not from terror, but from recognition. His brain didn’t punish him for what he’d done — it punished him for who he was. And that, he thought grimly, was harder to escape than any monster under the bed.

He woke up as always — with the night’s haunt still crushing his chest like a fat ghost sitting on his lungs. The residue of dreams clung to him, greasy and unshakeable. First thought: *still alive*. Second thought: *why?*

And then the ritual began.

He launched into the sacred liturgy of profanity, *bestemmie a raffica*, a furious cascade of Italian blasphemies echoing through the apartment like a heretical Gregorian chant. *Dio porco, dio cane, dio imbalsamatore ferroviario!* It was less a prayer and more a complaint to management — but at least it got the blood flowing.

Then: toothbrush. The mechanical act of pretending to care.
Quick shower. The symbolic baptism of another condemned day.
And finally — the real sacrament.

“Vodka time,” he muttered.

Vodka, lime, seltz — shaken with despair, garnished with denial.
The morning drink-your-brain-silent session began, crisp and
efficient. He didn’t drink to forget. He drank to *mute*. Like
lowering the volume on a malfunctioning universe.

Each sip whispered: *you don’t have to think right now*.
Each gulp promised: *you can postpone existence for twenty
minutes more*.

And for that fleeting moment, the world was perfect — a flat
horizon of numbness stretching as far as his mind refused to
wander.

A vodka-tranquilized Nathan could think almost without spiraling
— almost. The ethanol didn’t erase thoughts; it simply padded
their edges, made them bounce harmlessly around the skull for a
while. In that artificial peace, he remembered his gallery of extinct
friends.

There was one who couldn’t take a shit unless fully naked — as if
bowel movements required nudity to achieve spiritual alignment.

Another, who once asked in total seriousness what if humans had pleasure receptors on their fingers, so that masturbation would become a simple act of hand-rubbing, a round of applause for oneself.

And the one who donated blood — that heroic masochist who volunteered to be stabbed in the arm, an act that to needle-phobic Nathan seemed indistinguishable from martyrdom — yet refused to donate organs, because, as he put it, “I’d rather not get fondled when I’m not there.”

All friends who... *poof*. Gone.

Vanished into time, marriage, or the HR department.

“**Amici amici, amici un cazzo,**” as the Italians say — friends, friends, my ass.

The people he used to drink with, whether in smoky bars or in existential darkness, were all dead. Some in the literal sense — age, disease, Darwin — and others in the more tragic one: adulthood.

They’d already obtained their doctorate in conformity. They’d gotten married, settled down, pursued careers, bought ergonomic chairs. That was the slower, quieter death — the one that didn’t make headlines but killed the laughter first.

And Nathan, glass in hand, toasted them all with his morning poison. “To the dead,” he muttered, “and to the living who forgot how to be.”

Said the poet:

You wouldn't believe it — I've almost closed all doors to adventure.

Not because I'll settle down, but out of boredom or fear.

I don't spend nights despairing over what I've done or what I've had.

Things that have gone are gone, and my only regret is the opportunities I've missed.

Oh, what a lucky bastard that poet was.

What an easy, poetic mind to live with — all soft focus and closure, a man who could tie his regrets into neat metaphors and sleep eight hours afterward.

“Don't spend despairing nights?”

Nathan barked a laugh that had no joy in it.

“Ahahahahahaha.”

Nathan spent despairing *days*.

And *nights*.

And *weeks*.

And *fortnights* — the full medieval calendar of regret.

He despaired over what he'd done and what he hadn't, what he'd had and what he'd fumbled, what was gone and what refused to leave. He regretted the opportunities he'd missed and — far more viciously — the ones he never even got the chance to miss.

Because that was the cruellest joke of all: not failure, but *non-existence*.

The roads that never opened, the people who never appeared, the lives that were never even offered for screwing up.

And Nathan, sitting there with his half-empty glass and half-full bitterness, thought that maybe the poet hadn't closed all the doors to adventure — maybe he'd just never had to live with a brain that kept knocking after closing time.

The kid he'd been would have despised the man he'd become. And the man he was cringed at the kid he'd been — that smug little idiot he wished had never existed.

The kid was made of provincialism, prejudice, and arrogance — a walking sermon of certainty, still convinced that good intentions were currency and that justice was something you could enforce by tone of voice.

The man, by contrast, was built out of bad temper, attitude, and contempt — a Frankenstein's monster stitched together with cynicism and nicotine.

The kid judged; the man understood.

The kid believed he could respect everyone; the man learned, painfully and repeatedly, that some people — and some things — simply do not deserve respect.

In the end, Nathan realized he hadn't grown; he'd just changed tools.

Once, he'd used words to wound others.

Now, he used irony to cauterize himself.

The kid wanted to save the world.

The man just wanted a morning where his mind didn't wake up before he did.

Vodka is highly needed when you wish the past had never been, the present would end soon, and the future never bother to show up.

It's medicine for those allergic to time itself.

Especially in the morning — that cruel, fluorescent hour when pain clocks in early and demands overtime. When memories stretch and yawn like hangovers, and regret starts brewing before the coffee does.

Morning is when existence hurts most: the silence too loud, the light too honest, the body too sober for what the soul remembers. That's when the first glass isn't indulgence — it's anesthesia.

Vodka, lime, seltz: the holy trinity of forgetting.

It doesn't heal, it hushes.

It doesn't save, it delays.

But sometimes, delay is mercy enough to keep the pulse from
filing for resignation.

April is the cruellest month.

But so are May through March — each just with a different flavor
of disappointment.

Wednesday is the cruellest day.

But Tuesday envies it. Thursday imitates it. And Monday, the
archvillain, laughs from the shadows.

The morning is the cruellest hour — the one that drags you from
the grave without asking if you're done being dead.

But so are the afternoon, the evening, the night, and that damned
hour of the wolf when even insomnia gets tired of your company.

Nathan sometimes wondered why poets kept insisting on
specifying a particular time for suffering, as if misery ever
punched a clock. Existence, in his experience, was a 24/7
operation — no weekends, no holidays, no lunch breaks.

The cruellest page of a book is the last but one.

It tells you that you're not done elaborating it, and yet you soon

will be. It's the moment of false safety before the end—the illusion of having time, a breath before the guillotine.

But that's just our human obsession with giving behaviors to reality. We keep anthropomorphizing the inevitable, as if naming our executioner made him friendlier.

Carpenters say wood *speaks* to them.

Miners swear the mountain *behaves badly* when the mineral runs out, that she *gets angry* when she collapses.

Sailors, masochists by profession, have given entire psychological profiles to the sea—capricious, jealous, motherly, vengeful—calling the cruel Pacific “peaceful” only because they happened to survive the devilish Cape Horn and needed the lie to mean something.

It's the survival instinct of the species:
reducing what *is* to what we can *relate to*.

Dressing chaos in adjectives.

Giving moods to matter.

Pretending the universe has motives just so we don't have to admit it has none.

Nathan thought of that cruel almost-last page again. The moment before ending. The illusion of control. The page where you realize it's too late to change the story — and still, you turn it.

Then, a knock on the door.

Nathan sighs, adjusts the tripod, flips on the ring light, checks the framing. Instagram: on. OnlyFans: live.

He winks at the camera.

“Showtime!”

He opens the door. A man in a business suit stands there, clipboard of doom in hand.

Without hesitation, Nathan lands a straight punch.

CRACK. Nose. Explosion. Blood Jackson-Pollocks the hallway.

The man screams.

Nathan grabs him by the collar, drags him inside, dumps him on the floor like bad luggage, and shuts the door behind them.

He grabs the nearest bottle. “Here. **Drink till the pain goes away.**”

The man, clutching his face, takes a gulp.

“Aaaaaah. What the hell!”

“Don’t give me that, you snotty-faced heap of parrot droppings!”
roars Nathan, channeling divine fury and British sketch comedy in equal measure.

“What?”

“Shut your festering gob, you tit! Your type makes me puke! You vacuous, toffee-nosed, malodorous pervert!”

The man, now dazed and bleeding but intrigued:

“What? I came in here for an argument!”

“Oh!” Nathan blinks, suddenly gentle. “I’m sorry! This is *Existence*.”

“Oh! Oh, I see.”

“Yes, no, you want twelve-A next door.”

“Ah, I see. Sorry!”

“Not at all! Happens all the time.”

Nathan shuts the door, wipes the blood off his hand with a towel marked “content creation,” and turns back to the camera with a weary smile.

A beat later, muffled through the wall:

You did not.

Yes I did.

You did not.

Yes I did.

Didn’t.

Yes I did.

Look, this isn't an argument!

Yes it is.

No it isn't. It's just contradiction!

No it isn't.

Yes it is!

It is not!

Nathan, lighting another cigarette, mutters to the lens:

“Ladies and gentlemen, that's philosophy for you — nosebleeds and nonsense, both on subscription.”